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Mbuti

PEPO

The life force that animates all moving, living things, without which they would be mere vegetable growths, unable to move or think. The word *pepo* also has connotations of air and wind, and breathing is thought of as a manifestation of *pepo*. A gale of wind, then, is interpreted by some Mbuti as the breath of the forest itself (*pepo nde ndura*), as the breath of the disembodied spirits, or *keti* (*pepo nde baketi*).

KETI

Disembodied spirits, human and animal, who are not necessarily the spirits of the dead but may be independent manifestations of the forest, and who are disembodied only in that they are invisible to the Mbuti. They have an existence otherwise comparable to that of the Mbuti, and are likewise animated by *pepo*. There is no conflict of interests between them and the Mbuti, though occasionally the two worlds inadvertently become confused. An Mbuti may be in hot pursuit of an animal that suddenly disappears; he is likely to say that it must have been *keti*. An animal mysteriously drops dead; it was killed by a *keti* hunter (*keti a mu'e*) who thought he was in pursuit of a *keti* animal. Hallucinations and dreams are primarily the result of accidentally slipping from the one world into the other. All such meetings of *keti* and Mbuti are regarded as abnormal, and are never deliberately sought. They do not exactly induce fear, but there is undeniably the belief that one might cross over so effectively that one would never come back. The Mbuti say that if this happened you might not even know you had crossed over, which indicates that they conceive of the *keti* world as a mirror of their own.[1] Dreams, then, do not convey authority as being divine portents but, being real experience of a mirror world, they are, like all experiences, to be learned from. Thus Ambosu dreamed constantly that he was singing into the *molimo* trumpet. This did not give him the right to take up this role,

[1] On two occasions I heard *ekokomsa* described laughingly as a dance of the *keti*. The dance, involving a reversal of the sexes, is primarily associated with the *molimo*, hence with the spirit and supernatural world. There is a hunting dance in which there is a rapid succession of changes in direction, the hunters becoming the hunted and vice versa. Yet another instance of Mbuti recognition of reversal is seen in the legend of the Mbuti plantation (see Chapter 12), in which the Mbuti are the cultivators threatened by the animals of the forest (elephants), who undoubtedly represent the villagers.

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but everyone agreed that it was a clear indication that he should try. He became the leading trumpet singer, then, not through divine choice but simply through his experience in the *keti* world. He was not regarded as more spiritual, merely as more experienced. However, insofar as both Mbuti and *keti* derive their *pepo* from the forest, if the forest wills them to hunt together in the same time and place then the mirror images coincide exactly and it is, indeed, a "strong" hunt. Such coincidence is exhausting, however, and it is not something actively wished for except, possibly, in times of particularly poor hunting. Ideally the Mbuti and the *keti* should follow each other closely, but always remain just slightly apart.

BORU

A rather difficult concept of the "house" (*endu*—the same word as for a hut) inhabited by *pepo*. The human and animal body of flesh and blood is, in a sense, *boru*, and so is the invisibility of the *keti*. It is a term seldom used, but the concept affords a firm basis for a code of respect for the body, abuse or mutilation of which may drive away the *pepo*, causing "death" (which for the Mbuti is simply the departure of *pepo* and its return to the forest or the world of *keti*). Thus physical violence as a means of settling a dispute is abhorred as a sacrilege. A sound thrashing is perfectly in order, but any violence that produces blood causes an opening through which *pepo* may escape. For although associated with air and wind and thus with breath, it is not thought of as *being* any of these things, and its exact means of escape is unknown. The bodily apertures are all regarded as requiring attention, however, as possible avenues. It might be pointed out here that insofar as *pepo* is associated with life and may escape through these apertures, this is perfectly consistent with the Mbuti recognition of the sexual act as a means of conveying life, though they do not explicitly refer to semen as *pepo*. It is also consistent with the variations on the sexual act found in the *ekokomea* dance, where not only are the sexes reversed but attention is drawn to the less usual apertures, to be somewhat delicate. The role of *ekokomea* as a major feature of the death festival becomes immediately more understandable, its burlesque form allowing for the stated antipathy of the Mbuti to the unproductive forms of sexual perversion *ekokomea* so graphically depicts.

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578 689 whole camp and by making so much noise that all the animals would be frightened away, spoiling the next day's hunting. The Pygmies have a saying that a noisy camp is a hungry camp.

685 [186] Some misdemeanors are very simply dealt with. A Pygmy thinks nothing of stealing from Negroes; they are, after all, only animals, as seen by Pygmy eyes. But among themselves theft is virtually nonexistent. For one thing, they have few possessions, and for another there is no necessity for theft except through laziness.

685 • 159 [589] Pepei was such a lazy Pygmy, and he was always stealing from the Negroes. But out in the forest he was forced to work for his food, to build his own hut if he wanted one (he was a bachelor but liked having his own hut, sharing it with his younger brother), and he had to make his own bows and arrows and hunting net, and to cook his own food. This was hard on Pepei, and although he meant no harm he could not resist slipping around the camp at night, taking a leaf from this hut and a leaf from that, until he had enough to thatch his own hut—which he made by acquiring saplings in a similar manner. Food used to disappear mysteriously, and Pepei had always seen a dog stealing it. But finally he was caught in the act by old Sau, Amabosu's mother, who was a very strange and frightening old lady. Pepei crept into her hut one night and was lifting the lid of a pot when she smacked him hard on the wrist with a wooden pestle. She then grabbed him by the arm, twisting it behind his back, and forced him out into the open.

Nobody really minded Pepei's stealing, because he was a born comic and a great storyteller. But he had gone too far in stealing from old Sau, who had lost her husband and was supported by her son 685 Amabosu and his wife. So the men ran out of their huts angrily and 159 held Pepei, while the youths broke off thorny branches and whipped 627 him until he managed to break away. He went running as fast as he could into the forest; he cried bitterly and wrapped his arms around

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himself for comfort. He stayed in the forest for nearly twenty-four hours, and when he came back the next night he went straight to his hut, unseen, and lay down to sleep. His hut was between mine and Sau's, and I heard him come in, and I heard him crying softly because even his brother wouldn't speak to him.

The next day Pepei was his old self, and everyone was glad to see him laughing; they were happy to be able to listen to his jokes, and they all gave him food so that he wouldn't have to steal again.

But sometimes a dispute cannot be settled in any of these ways. It blows up too quickly to be ended by ridicule; the participants are too old to be thrashed; yet it is not serious enough to merit ostracism. Such disputes are usually trivial in origin, and often arise from the confined and close conditions of living. Personal relations become very involved in a hunting group, particularly when both members of a sister-exchange marriage are living in the same group.

Under this system, when a boy chooses a wife he becomes obliged to find a "sister"—actually any girl relative—to offer in exchange to his bride's family for one of their bachelor sons. This can be quite a chore, as it may be difficult to find a "sister" who is willing to marry the youth his in-laws have in mind as a groom, and whom the groom himself will also like.

Amabosu had married Ekianga's sister, and Ekianga had married, as his third wife, Amabosu's sister, the beautiful Kamaikan. He had just had a child by her, while Amabosu was still childless. Since Kamaikan was nursing a child, Ekianga was under an obligation not to sleep with her, and his two other wives were happy that at last they could expect him to pay them some attention. But to everyone's dismay he continued to sleep with Kamaikan. And one day Amabosu started making loud remarks across the camp about his sister's health.

This was not at Apa Lelo, but at a later camp, Apa Kadikeru. Amabosu's hut was to my right, and it faced directly across toward

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Not long afterward Aberi became ill. He was so ill that he could not leave the initiation camp, and he slept on the wooden initiation bed beside the boys, moaning and tossing in his fever. When he recovered he said that he had been bewitched, that the villagers were trying to kill him. He even attacked his brother Masalito for having broken just about every rule in the book.

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The Pygmies practice no sorcery or witchcraft, but they know it is rife among their neighbors and they have seen enough of it in action to be uneasy about it. Aberi was one of the few who really believed in it, and who knew what real fear was. He knew fear not only of being bewitched, but of being accused of witchcraft; for his wife, Tamasa, the kindly woman disfigured with yaws, was frequently accused by the villagers. The villagers felt that anyone cursed with such a dreadful deformity must be evil. On several occasions I heard Pygmies accuse old Sau, the mother of Amabosu the young singer, of being a witch. But although they used the village word, it had a different meaning. They were merely accusing her of making trouble. They sometimes said the same thing of other old people who were, as old Pygmies often are, strong-minded and obstinate.

The villagers, however, believe that one can be possessed of a substance which gives one supernatural powers and compels the use of them to harm others. Sometimes it works in such a way that the witch may not even be aware of what he or she is doing, and various forms of divination are used to test suspects. The only time the Pygmies think seriously about witchcraft is when they are in the village, or when villagers visit them in the forest. A single villager visiting a forest hunting camp can bring his evil with him, but when he departs it departs with him.

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It was curious that Aberi, the one who feared this evil most, should apparently die by it. He used to tell a story of how one night in the village he had been going to the latrine when he was caught from behind, as if by a hand clutching at his shoulder. But there was

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nobody there. He struggled and wrestled but could not escape, and eventually he was thrown onto the ground. He suffered violent dysentery from that time on. But in spite of this illness, Aberi was still strong and healthy enough to be one of the most energetic, if not one of the most successful hunters. And so when he fell ill during a visit to the village, some time after the elima had ended, nobody thought much about it—except Aberi. He claimed that he had been bewitched, and he knew why. He said that many months ago he and two other Pygmies had promised a villager from the BaNgwana village of Dar es Salaam that they would give him a lot of meat if he let them have a sack of rice. The villager, unwisely, gave them the rice but never got the meat. After several attempts to get his due he cursed all three with a powerful curse, and it was this curse, Aberi said, that was killing him. This villager not only possessed the witchcraft substance, but he knew it and used it deliberately. He was a sorcerer. Nobody believed Aberi, however, and slowly he got better.

One evening I met him wandering up the path leading from Cephu's tiny camp to our own, and I asked him how he was, saying that it was good to see him walking again. He often wore a dismal, dejected look, but this time his face was completely empty of any expression whatsoever. It was frightening to see a face normally full of one emotion or another so void. Even his ugliness had deserted him, and in its place there was just nothing. Aberi said, slowly and carefully, that his body was better but he was going to die because he had been cursed, and for that there was no cure. He spent a short while in our camp, and we all tried to cheer him up. He seemed to brighten after a little singing, and when he left us he was almost cheerful.

Early in the morning, while it was still dark, I was awakened by an outburst of the most terrible wailing and crying, and I knew what it meant without asking the ash-gray Kenge, who came pounding at my door. I went outside, and in the dim light I saw Pygmies all over

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the place, standing in the doors of their huts, listening. One after another said, "Aberi is dead, completely dead."

Apparently he had gone back to his camp, and Tamasa had given him a little hot broth to warm him up, as he complained of being cold. He had gone to sleep, but later, quite suddenly and without any warning, he had awakened with a start, struggling violently as though trying to get up. But some unseen power was clutching at his shoulder, and Aberi gave a loud cry and fell back dead. Within a matter of weeks both the other Pygmies who had been cursed with Aberi had also died, under similar circumstances.

If the Pygmies had believed in witchcraft, such a terrible series of coincidences would certainly have brought forth an accusation. As it was they never even mentioned any possibility other than that the villager might have used poison. This could have been true in Aberi's case—but in all three? The Pygmies shook their heads and said nothing.

Aberi was buried the following afternoon, with villagers officiating. Sansiwake was almost beside himself with grief, and Tamasa had to be dragged bodily away from the grave. When the women had all left, the villagers started their usual inquiry into the death, to see who was responsible. They did not mention their fellow villager from Dar es Salaam, the one who had cursed Aberi; instead they named Tamasa. Kelemoke and Masalito, who had their arms around Sansiwake and were trying to comfort him, turned and looked at the accusers. Kelemoke spoke for them both. He said, quietly, but with considerable feeling, "Tamasa is our sister, Tamasa is our mother. *We* do not kill our own kind."

Without waiting for the villagers to finish their formalities, the Pygmies all returned to their camps and began preparing to leave the village and go back to the forest, where such things do not happen.